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Pratt, Nicholas

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## **Producing assessment truths: a Foucauldian analysis of teachers' reorganisation of levels in English primary schools**

Nick Pratt<sup>a\*</sup> and Julie Alderton<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Plymouth Institute of Education, Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK;* <sup>b</sup> *Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK*

\*Contact: Nick Pratt: [nick.pratt@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:nick.pratt@plymouth.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

This paper considers a recent policy initiative in assessment in English primary (5-11 years) schools in which curriculum 'levels' used by teachers to judge pupils' attainment were suddenly removed. Previous work has largely focused on assessment of pupils, but we examine assessment as an activity through which teachers reproduce their professional standing. Using data from a small-scale study we investigate how teachers responded to these changes and what this tells us about the way in which the economy, and politics, of assessment practices operate at school level. Using Foucault as a theoretical framework, we make visible how this system was reorganised by teachers through the construction of new regimes of truth. Implications include evidence of a potentially damaging changing relationship between teachers and pupils, the key role of technology and the deleterious effect of neoliberalism on teachers' and pupils' relationships with both the process and subject matter of learning.

### **Starting points**

The examination [assessment] combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. (Foucault 1977, 84)

This quote from Foucault sets out both the substantive concern and the theoretical stance of this paper, namely, an interest in English primary (5-11 years) school assessment from a Foucauldian perspective. The focus is on assessment not simply as a technical activity to improve pupil outcomes, but as a mechanism through which teachers are managed, and manage their own professional selves. Our interest in this area builds on previous research, including our own (Pratt 2016a, 2016b; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017) looking at the effects of assessment in primary education on pedagogy, and that of others on pupil engagement with schooling (Keddie 2016). However, the focus here is on a specific policy initiative in the English primary system during the academic year 2015 – 2016 which involved a sudden, largely unexpected, move from evaluating pupils' progress against national standards indicated by numbered 'levels' to a situation in which these levels were entirely removed. This government initiative (Department for Education 2016) shook up a well-established set of practices in primary schools. Our reason for studying it therefore was to examine how teachers reorganized their work in light of such a dramatic change and, in doing so, to understand more fully how assessment policy is 'translated' in practice (Perryman et al. 2017). Our assumption is that assessment is not, as policy tends to suggest, a neutral uncovering of pupils' ability for the purposes of teaching and accountability, but a more complex, socially-constructed activity which is important in teachers' professional lives and through which they establish and maintain their professional identity (Pratt 2016a, 2016b). Of course assessment takes place in the context of school subjects and we chose to focus on mathematics because it forms an interesting context in light of the perception held by many people that it is constituted in an objective body of knowledge that is acquired by learners and can be assessed accurately and definitively – though this view is contested by many, including ourselves (Boaler 2002; Pratt and Kelly 2016;

Sfard 1998). Despite this focus, much of what we have to say would, we believe, apply more generally across schooling as a whole.

In constructing the paper we refer to data from a study using interviews with teachers to address our research questions: how have teachers responded to the changes that a new curriculum and assessment system imposed; and what does this tell us about the way in which the economy, and politics, of truth in assessment practices have been re-organised? Our analysis draws on the theoretical work of Foucault in trying to understand the answers to these questions, the aim being to make visible to policy makers and practitioners the workings of the system within which individuals have to practise.

### **The history of levels**

Our starting point is a claim that, in English primary schools, assessment plays a major – perhaps *the* major – role in influencing teaching and learning. Understanding assessment is therefore crucial to understanding teaching more generally. Pratt (2016a) argues that, in English primary schools, assessment revolves around the marketised and high-stakes, accountable nature of the education system. Such a system is rooted in the current neoliberal and neo-conservative culture of education that is firmly established in England (and many other countries too). A full exploration of these roots is beyond the scope of this paper, but is well articulated in Apple (2005), with Ball (2003) describing its manifestation in teacher 'performativity'. Such performativity can be experienced in differing ways. For some teachers it can be affirming of a professional role well-executed, whilst for others as symptoms of stress rooted in competition between schools and immediate colleagues (Pratt 2016b); and for pupils as forms of competition and performative behaviour that mirror the adults (Keddie 2016). Crucially, as Fisher-Ari, Kavanagh, and Martin (2017) demonstrate in the US context, it tends to lead to

practices which 'create limiting expectations and deficit views of learners' and cause 'affective distress for teachers and students' (ibid., p. 255; see also Ball et al. 2012; Au 2008).

As Keddie (2016, 109) describes,

Broadly speaking, this culture utilises business-derived concepts of measurement, evaluation and comparison (Leys 2003) to represent school effectiveness and has reduced students (as well as teachers and schools) to 'auditable commodities', so they may be efficiently held to account and assessed against quantifiable standards of 'success'.

In England the form of the auditable commodity referred to here was, until 2015, the National Curriculum *level*, a measure of pupils' progress up a numbered 1 – 10 scale related to achievements against 'statements of attainment' in the curriculum documents. Teachers were required to assess pupils against this scale, with externally organised, standardised testing at ages 7 and 11. Schools were then judged externally on the 'progress' made by pupils against these levels, with results published to provide parents with information about the 'quality' of education. Any drop in such standards might trigger an inspection which, if failed, had serious repercussions for staff (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017). At classroom level therefore, individual teachers' performances were similarly monitored and 'managed' within schools.

The conception of levels to describe pupils' progress against the curriculum, on which the whole system is predicated, is traceable to a 1988 report from the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) (Department of Education and Science 1988) set up by the Conservative government of the time. In relation to these 'levels of attainment', the report (ibid., p.8) states that:

It would be tedious if, in reporting on an assessment, one had to spell out, in detail and every time, what a pupil knows and can do in each profile component. It would be even more difficult to present the detailed information as a profile for a pupil showing achievement across the curriculum, or to aggregate such information for a class, or a school, or an authority as a whole. The information will be easier to handle, and easier to comprehend, if different levels of achievement are given numbers or letters.

It was abundantly clear therefore that the enumeration of attainment which has afforded the commodification of pupils' and teachers' work was never intended to be anything other than a convenient shorthand for describing a much more complex and nuanced process of assessment, albeit one which also allowed for aggregation of information. Moreover, the Task Group were at pains to allay 'fears about national assessment', including 'that schools or teachers may be singled out unfairly; and that the process may unduly constrain the work of a school' (ibid. p.17). Indeed, the Group specified that

it has been in no doubt that a successful system of assessment depends upon teachers' confidence in it and their willingness to take responsibility for it. These requirements make it necessary that the system should support teachers' professional concern for the effectiveness of their teaching (ibid.).

### **A New Dawn – Assessment without levels**

Fast-forwarding twenty-five years from this influential TGAT report, the coalition government of 2014 rewrote the National Curriculum for England and made a decision to remove levels from the assessment system. Alongside this radical, overnight change, the government set up a Commission on Assessment Without Levels (McIntosh 2015) to 'provide advice and support to schools in developing new approaches to their own in-school assessment' (p. 5) and to help them 'make informed choices about what might work for their pupils, staff and curriculum' (ibid.).

Whilst schools were left to themselves to make decisions about ongoing assessment, in terms of statutory outcomes the results of national curriculum tests were now to be reported using a scaled score between 80 and 120, where a score of at least 100 indicates the expected standard for school performance measures. For the majority of children at age 11, this new expected standard is higher than the previous benchmark. Furthermore, guidance for mathematics specifies that 'the majority of pupils will move through the programmes of study at broadly the same pace' (Department for Education 2013, 99), replacing previous advice to accelerate high attaining children through new content. In classrooms, therefore, progress *through* the curriculum was replaced by progress *within* it; and a new language of 'mastery' sprang up to describe this, denoting 'a focus on achieving a deeper understanding of fewer topics, through problem-solving, questioning and encouraging deep mathematical thinking' (McIntosh 2015, 17). Statutory progress measures of pupils and schools across key stages are also calculated differently. Monitoring progress by criterion-referenced levels and sub-levels has been replaced by a normalised value-added measure. Pupils' results at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2 (ages 7 and 11) are compared to the achievements of other pupils and school-level progress scores are presented as positive or negative numbers, with a score of zero indicating that pupils do as well at key stage 2 as those with similar prior attainment nationally. A new 'floor' standard requires that at least 65% of pupils in the school's cohort meet the expected standard in mathematics and English, or that a school achieves sufficient progress scores (Department for Education 2016). Schools not achieving the floor standard will be scrutinised through additional inspection and may have their freedom curtailed. Indeed, the Commission notes that 'with freedom, however, comes responsibility' (McIntosh 2015, 10) and 'recognises that the transition to assessment without Attainment Targets and levels will be challenging, and that

schools will have to develop and manage their assessment systems during a period of change' (p.16). It justifies this on the basis of 'a much greater focus on high quality formative assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning' and the introduction to the report explains the rationale for the removal of levels in this process, namely that,

despite being intended only for use in statutory national assessment, too frequently levels also came to be used for in-school assessment between key stages in order to monitor whether pupils were on track ...'. (McIntosh 2015, 5)

Ironically, in light of TGAT's clear statement about the origin of levels (above), it also claimed that,

Levels were never designed to capture formative assessment, but they frequently came to be used in this way, which often distorted the purpose of formative assessment and squeezed out certain valuable tasks which were not amenable to levelling. (ibid. p. 15)

As we noted, to 'capture formative assessment' using numbers as shorthand was exactly what levels *were* designed to do in their original incarnation, and TGAT had even had the foresight to warn against the danger of the 'distortion' outlined 30 years later by McIntosh. What is also noticeable here though is the subtle shifting of blame to teachers themselves for, what it claims is, the inappropriate use of levels; the Commission warning that 'school leaders should be careful to ensure that the primary purpose of assessment is not distorted by using it for multiple purposes' (p. 24).

## **Theoretical framework**

To understand the relationship between teachers' practices and systemic changes to the process of assessment, we draw on Foucault. As Ball (2013) notes, Foucault's work is wide-ranging and often provocative, but provides an insight into how society at a grand



scale relates to the everyday ordinariness of life. It tends to be suggestive of ways to think, opening up a critical space from which one can work heuristically to see the world differently. Such an approach is best understood dynamically through the practice of analysis itself rather than statically in a description *a priori*, and hence we hope that our theoretical framework will be elucidated in its use in the sections that follow. Nonetheless, we first outline some of the main ideas on which this analysis draws in order to orientate the reader towards our approach to understanding assessment practices.

Our focus is on teachers' accounts of their practice in relation to power, knowledge and truth. In particular we draw on Foucault's work on governmentality, brought together in the publication of his 1980 lecture series entitled 'On the Government of the Living' (Foucault 2014) in which he makes a 'shift from the notion of knowledge-power to the notion of government by the truth' (ibid., 11); from power which originates in sovereignty and disciplinary action to power originating in Christian pastoral practices – though noting that all three can operate alongside each other. He argues convincingly that the embedding of these practices in culture influences modern-day forms of governmentality and the ways in which individuals govern themselves.

Where sovereign power relates to institutions or individuals acknowledged as having the legal and moral right to govern and disciplinary power to the mechanisms and tools of regulation and control (here, of assessment in schooling), pastoral power originates in the notion of the pastorate and their care of their flock. This was operationalised in the way people were not just governed for the benefit of society at large, but were taught acts of self-governance – 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1988) – for the success of society and their own personal liberation and salvation. Foucault (1982, 783) argues that although ecclesiastical institutionalisation 'has ceased

or at least lost its vitality', such 'governmentality' is still at the heart of modern society and indeed 'has spread and multiplied outside of the ecclesiastical institution' (ibid.). People are managed, and learn to manage themselves, in line with the 'reason of state' which both provides a reason *to* act in particular ways and defines, through its dominant discourses, which actions are *reasonable* (and which are not) – that 'group of rules proper to discursive practices ... [which] define the ordering of objects' (Foucault 1972, 49). Such government is not projected down from above for the benefit solely of the sovereign; instead 'this form of power is salvation oriented ... [and] is linked to the production of truth' (Foucault 1982, 783). Indeed, the key to modern pastoral power is not only to have the subject at the heart of such processes but to engage it in it. Knowledge production is not an activity external to the subject but one co-produced by it.

From this perspective teachers' practices, and those of their pupils too, are seen as being governed by discourses of schooling which define what is (in)appropriate, (un)acceptable and (ab)normal – literally, how life should be ordered. We emphasise that such governance can be a good or bad thing; power relations provide the possibility of change because of the way in which 'power produces knowledge' (Foucault 1977, 27). Participants central to a field (teachers in their classroom settings, but also senior managers in the school as a whole, policy makers and children) produce knowledge, and are themselves produced, through their language and activity which positions and influences what can and cannot be said and done, 'guiding people through their [professional] lives and governing their conduct to maintain good order' (Schirato, Danaher, and Webb 2012, 76). Note that, in our understanding of Foucault's work, we do not see subjects' practices as pre-determined or inevitable but, as we outline below, power/knowledge may well flow in ways which render things invisible to actors.

This reason of state, or governmentality, which also acts through disciplinary apparatuses and sovereign powers, defines domains of *validity*, *normativity* and *actuality* (Foucault 2002) in discourse – the discourse of school assessment in this case. The first, validity, defines the 'criteria by which one may discuss the truth or falsehood of a proposition' (ibid., p.68); the second, normativity, defines 'the criteria [by which] one may exclude certain statements as irrelevant, or inessential and marginal, or non-scientific' (ibid.); and the third, actuality, articulates how these are operationalised. Through all of this 'each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true' (Foucault 1980, 131). Such discourses set the limits of what is thinkable and unthinkable.

It is through the theoretical lens of the ideas above that we return to mathematics assessment, and the following questions: how have teachers responded to the changes that a new curriculum and assessment system imposed; and in doing so, how have they re-organised the economy, and politics, of truth in assessment practices? We reiterate that our aim is *not* to judge teachers' actions against some ideal version of practice, but to make visible the ways in which assessment discourses come into being and how they normalize certain practices and relations between teachers, school systems and pupils, rendering them common-sense, irrevocable and change-resistant.

## **Methodology**

The project on which this paper is based involved extended semi-structured interviews with primary teachers in eight different state schools (11 teachers in total – see table 1) in the summer of 2016, the end of the first school year after the removal of levels. This generated c.15 hours of recordings which were transcribed by the authors themselves in order to get as close as we could to the data. Teachers and schools were chosen purposively to reflect a range of ages, experience, school types and locations and in

addition to interviews we also undertook an analysis of the documentation relating to levels, both historical, for example in TGAT's work, and contemporary, in the work of current curriculum and assessment policy. Data from all these sources were analysed thematically in relation to our research question, looking for indicators of the way in which teachers invoked validity and normativity in their work.

[Insert Table 1 around here]

Our work conformed to the ethical procedures of the British Educational Research Association and were approved by our employing institutions. Nonetheless, in working with Foucault it would be particularly strange to claim that we were able to eliminate the flow of power between us and our participants. The interviews sought to find out how teachers represent themselves and this professional identity 'work' was, of course, at play in the interviews themselves. To account for this, as well as remaining sensitive to it in our analysis, our interviews started with questions that asked participants to describe examples of their practice. In this sense we have tried to represent the actuality of their work as best we can though, inevitably, the result is a construction between us. Hence, we do not claim it is 'the truth' but, rather, 'a truth' aimed at providing an account *of* teachers' actions before potentially accounting *for* them.

Our aim is not therefore to claim that the specifics are generalizable to every teacher beyond, or even within, the data set. Rather, the analysis is of the system of governmentality and the dominant discourses that constitute it. Whilst we can only present a small amount of our data to illustrate our claims, we have selected this carefully, ensuring that teachers' views, though sometimes individual, are never contradictory of the data set as a whole. We think it offers a trustworthy and useful

analysis in this sense meaning that, despite our caution above, it is likely to be applicable to many other teachers in terms of the way in which their work becomes problematised, even if not in terms of how each individual might respond.

### **Teachers' responses to change**

Our research question asked both how teachers responded to change and what this tells us about the way in which the economy, and politics, of truth in assessment practices have been re-organised. In its final report, the Commission for Assessment Without Levels claimed that

The changes to the National Curriculum and its assessment go well beyond mere changes of content. They invoke very different day-to-day approaches to assessment and signal fundamental shifts in ideas about learning and assessment. (McIntosh 2015, 3)

However, the Commission noted that despite 'overwhelming evidence that levels needed to go' in practice 'the system has been so conditioned by levels that there is considerable challenge in moving away from them' (ibid., p.4). This statement appears to have proven prophetic as far as the teachers in our study were concerned. For example,

Becky: The year 5 Emerging children will be our 'low ability', our year 5 Developing will be those who are average and our year 5 Secure will be our top fliers and those will be our markers. And there are hashtag codes which sort of match, i.e. year 5D like a C or a B or an A. And I think pupil tracker [software for monitoring pupil outcomes] will refine those a bit more so you know the average child, is she bottom of the average D, or is she top of the average D, is she nearly ready to be secure or is she really just scraping in?...

INT: Yes, ok, so it's beginning to kind of nuance itself ...

Becky: Yeah, it's going back to levels and sub-levels ... It seriously is ...

Jasmine: We have coloured bands that we assess children [against]. So basically if they're red, they're significantly behind year group expectations. So, all of our assessments now are done on where they should be in that year group. ...

Mike: we went to [town name] for a big research and development conference that they had. A lot of secondary schools were there and what they've done is pretty much replace levels with levels where they've still got numbers for everything . Obviously, we've got our 1, 2, 3, 4 but they've still got it broken down into what would have been sub-levels.

Without exception, teachers in all the schools had simply adopted something akin to levels but alternatively named. Such a desire for continuity came as no surprise to us; in a previous study (Pratt 2016b) we have argued that it is through controlling assessment that teachers do professional work for themselves which positions them as expert and maintains the professional capital they rely on to be seen as deserving of success. Such practices rely on a series of discourses, hierarchically arranged, namely:

- (1) a *discourse of control*; a belief that pupils' progress is predictable and controllable across time through careful and effective teaching;
- (2) a *discourse of participation*; willing (or inescapable) participation in official expectations of such progress;
- (3) a *discourse of responsibility*; in which teachers accept individual responsibility for learning outcomes through their teaching.

It is only through putting one's faith in all the above that one can participate in a *discourse of meritocracy*, legitimising pupils' progress as a means to gauge teachers' status. As Isla notes,

I am not sure that in reality we have moved from levels to non-levels in that it is so embedded in people's practice to think of a child as being at a numerical value that we are using something called Target Tracker and so we input data that **makes us**,

**that requires us, to show steps of progress** and we are working towards six steps of progress so, essentially, we are still pegging them on to where we would hope they would be. (Isla; emphasis added)

Thus, in our sample, far from 'fundamental shifts in ideas about learning and assessment' (McIntosh 2015, 3) teachers appeared to be altering the superficial aspects of assessment – language and some of the assessment tools they use – but were all holding on to the fundamental idea that *demonstrating progress* was its main aim. In light of our points above about the necessity of meritocracy in contemporary, neoliberal schooling, such behaviour seems inevitable given how such discourses have become central to the reason of state. Progress is the language of success in schools and to be successful, teachers have to be able to speak this language in some way, leading us to ask how this is made to function through a reorganisation of the economy and politics of assessment 'truths'.

### **Reorganising the politics and economy of truth**

In responding to this question, we return to the quote used to start this paper, arguing that assessment establishes 'a normalizing gaze' over people, 'a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them' (Foucault 1977, 184). In analysing the historical development of pastoral power Foucault argued that from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards a

proliferation of the aims and agents of pastoral power focused the development of knowledge of man around two roles: one, globalizing and quantitative, concerning the population; the other, analytical, concerning the individual. (Foucault 1982, 784)

Such 'proliferation of aims and agents' of power seems highly contemporary to us – in the form of continuous educational change and the omnipresent monitoring of schools,

teachers and pupils. Whilst teachers use assessment discourses of control, participation and responsibility in establishing such a normalizing gaze over their pupils, simultaneously they themselves are being held to account with the same data in order to be differentiated and judged by senior staff. Managers, in turn, are accountable to the Department for Education and policed by the inspection service. It is in this context of 'aims and agents of pastoral power' that we marked out Isla's use of the phrase 'makes us, that requires us, to show steps of progress' in the preceding quote. To survive in such an accountable regime requires individuals and organisations to empower themselves by making visible aspects of their practice which can then act to symbolise success.

As we articulated above, Foucault's argument is that such power flows through the creation of discourses which can be *made to function* as truth within a field of practice. As Foucault points out, this is a

truth which does not belong to the order of what is, but to the order of what happens ... a truth which is not found but aroused and hunted down: production rather than apophantic [declaration]. This kind of truth does not call for method, but for strategy. (Foucault 2006, 237)

### ***Reconstructing accountability in pupil assessment***

Such strategy is to be found in the manner in which teachers worked to find ways of replacing what had been lost. Although teachers had re-adopted a language of levels, as Becky makes clear 'what we've found talking to colleagues in our learning community is that nobody knew the lie of the land or where it was going' and Ann complains that 'it sounds like the standard is going to slightly change every single year, which just makes it *completely* confusing'. Faced with a loss of control regarding the way in which new levels were to be judged, participants were working at validating discourses which



would function as truths to replace them. Reference to a 'science' of assessment was frequent; descriptions of practice were punctuated with the language of 'exact-ness' and (pseudo) correlational relationships through which they could try to retake control of learning. For example, Jill notes that 'we haven't yet defined *exactly* what it means to be emerging, developing and secure' and Becky claims that 'there is no *correlation* between [the new levels] and what the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) are testing' (emphases added). Ann was struggling with the boundaries between the newly constructed levels asking

what is that line where they go from one to the other? And I think in the end I worked out a mathematical formula for the way in which I would do it [laughs] because I couldn't see a way through it.

Far from enriching forms of teacher assessment, in-house, written testing seemed to be becoming more prevalent, as a means of identifying both what had been achieved and what teaching might focus on. For example:

The children do the same test in the middle, towards the end of the Autumn term, towards the end of Spring and Summer and the tests are the same level of difficulty and test the same kinds of things each time and so the hope is that the results will... that progress is easy to track and easy to show if outsiders are coming in. That's what we are being told. (Aileen)

For Ann, despite her mathematical formula, she

didn't want to say children were secure because I thought actually I need to check in the summer if they are secure, and also there was no summative test in the summer either for Y5, so there wasn't that to kind of help you or back you up ...

As Foucault notes, 'where there is power, where power is necessary, where one wishes to show effectively that this is where the power lies, there must be truth' (Foucault

2014, 9). In this light, most of the eight schools were creating forms of validation through the purchase of commercial tests which produced a standardized score to show 'where [pupils] should be – 100 being "bang-on", what we call age-related' (Jasmine). In another school there were 'computer assessments ... a summative test that has been taken by thirty-five thousand children around the country' and where 'the things we've found the most useful is it gives you a standardized score [and] does an awful lot of the statistical work for you' (Mike).

Thus what emerges is a picture of the reconstruction of truths around assessment, largely validated through testing and normalized – to define what is (ir)relevant, (in)essential and central/marginal to schools' practice – through forms of standardization represented in a discourse of science. This provides teachers with a (reconstructed) discourse of control, allowing them to participate again in taking responsibility for pupils' learning and to merit their performance as teachers (Pratt 2016b). However, it did not only afford the opportunity to *take* responsibility but also imposed on teachers a form of *responsibilisation*, the 'construction of moral agency as the necessary ontological condition for ensuring an entrepreneurial disposition' (Shamir 2008, 7). In the market of school performance, success and failure must be accounted for (Keddie 2016; Pratt 2016a). The reconstruction of the truths of assessment as scientific and reason-able allowed the teachers in our study to 'build stories of the children who are the ones who haven't quite got there' so that 'actually, we've got reasons' (Mike). We emphasise that these accounts were not all defensive; the teachers also spoke frequently and positively of using testing to identify future learning needs and hence to plan teaching. Nonetheless, their descriptions of practice were often inseparable from its justification, for example for Jasmine, although it was important that 'I can see how much progress they have made [if they] are not age-related then

actually I've got that story there ... and the person who does my performance

management knows what is going on'. The dual role of assessment data – for forming judgements about future learning and to construct accountability stories – is summed up by Becky who notes that the systems in place provide

a useful tool while you are assessing children really. But the data that it has produced, you can make your own story up about data anyway. We just need something to make up a story with and it is providing that. (Becky)

### ***Technologies of truth***

As noted above, Foucault (2006, 237) suggests that truths associated with social practices are not 'there' but need to be 'aroused and hunted down'. Whilst our data points to a complex and far-ranging set of interrelated means by which this happens, it also illustrates how much of this work is done through the use of technologies such as online and paper tests, record keeping tools, statistical/tracking software and reporting mechanisms.

And actually, kind of, our big job this year has been establishing – we're going to have portfolios ready for next year of "this is what work looks like for age related at the end of year 3, end of year 4, end of year 5, end of 6". So people can start, actually, see what it's like. (Mike)

Once we've got the tests in, we then meet as a team and we moderate, so we would pull out children and we say "this child is very similar to this child. I've got evidence of them being able to reason and they can apply those skills" here and then we can almost band their books. (Jasmine)

In every case, these tools were central to the descriptions of practice provided by the teachers in our study. They are technologies of production, focused around the enumeration of pupils' progress and playing a role in generating, tracing and managing assessment data. Moreover, in re-establishing truths for discourses of control and

participation, they act as technologies for meaning making through shared signification and for control for, and of, pupils and teachers themselves.

I've defined what I'd expect a child to do for emerging, developing, secure, exceeding within that topic [...] I've tried to put into it is some sort of progression with concrete, pictorial, abstract within it so that it supports teachers to see what does it mean to be emerging, what does it mean to be developing and what does it mean to be exceeding and not. (Jill)

And you know the SPT [School Pupil Tracker – software] is churning out some data, um, which [head teacher] needs to ... and we'll need to show to Ofsted [inspection service]. We need to show progress and it will do the job. (Becky)

In doing so they act to validate, defining the means by which one can discuss assessment truthfully, or 'exactly'; and act as a means of normativity through the quantification and categorisation of individuals creating a 'modern matrix of individualization' (Foucault 1982, 783) and a re-definition of 'the norm'.

### **Governing at a distance: calculable subjects**

In his work 'On the government of the living' Foucault (2014, 6) illustrates how the exercise of power is enabled through the construction of truths. He notes that

it was not a question, therefore, of establishing the correctness of what is true as opposed to the false that is refuted and eliminated. Essentially it was a question of making truth itself appear against the background of the unknown, hidden, invisible, and unpredictable. So it was not so much a matter of organizing a knowledge, of the organization of a useful system of knowledge necessary and sufficient for the exercise of government. It was a matter of a ritual of manifestation of the truth maintaining a number of relations with the exercise of power that, even if calculation is not absent from them, certainly cannot be reduced to pure and simple utility, and what I would like to take up again a little is the nature of the relations between this ritual of manifestation of the truth and the exercise of power.

We also would like to take this up, since Foucault's description of a 'ritual of manifestation of the truth' seems to describe closely what we saw in our study. For example, our study repeatedly showed how assessment data, and the truths around which it was generated, were used to maintain relations of control and responsabilisation between teachers.

I might send a teacher a list of pupils and I'll say "Right, these are the pupils I want you to feed back to me on" and we'll discuss and we can make sure we've got things in place for them. Or it might be that we say to teachers "Right, your focus for this pupil progress meeting is your yellows, the ones who ... what do we need to put in place to make sure that they can be there and be secure with all of the KPIs [Key Performance Indicators] by the end of the year". (Jasmine)

We emphasise at this juncture that we are not trying to suggest that teachers were acting cynically, or using assessment solely for their own ends; far from it. Teachers talked repeatedly, frequently and with great sincerity about assessment being an ongoing activity related to classroom planning and teaching and how it formed part of their work to ensure pupils were well served. Nonetheless, even this work was based on the same kinds of ritual manifestations of the truth and rarely separable from the need to monitor progress across levels. In this sense we see the work of assessment not just in terms of technologies of production, but also as a *technology of the self* (see, for example, Rose 1999); an important part of the way in which teachers constitute their own subjectivities and learn to govern their thoughts and conduct. As Ball et al (2011, 630) state 'as teachers engage with policy and bring their creativity to bear on its enactment, they are also captured by it. They change it, in some ways, and it changes them'. In losing levels teachers have had to reconstruct them in order to re-establish the categories for pupils around which they organise their work. These are formed through the enumeration of pupils' 'level' to form part of the 'grid of intelligibility' (see Ball 2013), a 'calculable

person, the person rendered calculable to others and to him- or herself in terms of numbers' (Rose 1999, 213). However, teachers themselves are also rendered calculable by this process and therefore subject to the same kinds of calculation. Furthermore, Rose identifies that this allows for 'the formation of a centre' distant from the place of practice, for which:

Events must be inscribed in standardized forms, the inscriptions must be transported from far and wide and accumulated in a central locale, where they can be aggregated, compared, compiled and the subject of calculation ... [through which] ... new conduits of power are brought into being between those who wish to exercise power and those over whom they wish to exercise it. (ibid., 211)

To evidence this process in our data we quote at length from Jasmine who describes the process of performance management that surrounds her work.

[Jasmine logs-on to an online system.]

J: So it is called Perspective. Everybody has their own Dashboard and I get, so you can see that I've been updating my targets that I've been doing. These are kind of what's been happening. We get things that come through from the national Perspective people [who run and administer the online system]. Yesterday there was something sent through about KS2 results. And all of my performance management and observations are put through here so also when I do learning walks I do them on an iPad. I can take photos of children in lessons and things and upload it on here. Say I want to go onto my observations [browses to appropriate page]. These are all the observations that I've had done of me this year or I've done on other people.

INT: So how many have you had?

J: Some of them are learning walks. Some of these I won't even have noticed. One, two three – those are the learning walks that are linked in with our whole school focus and then this one was a learning walk, that one was our London Challenge Schools headmaster. He observed me ... So I think I've had three. That was Autumn, that's an appraisal. I think I've had three so far, one a term. So I can just pull off [the information] on here. So we have it with descriptors. So it's quite a nice way for me to track all of my bits [of data], but I get emails. So that has

pinged in and you get all the comments that they have left while they've been in your room.

... Then your performance management is in here. So I can look at it. I have my three targets for the year so I've got one which is about having 85% of my class to be year 3 embedded [what others, above, have called 'secure']. That is what we were calling it at the beginning of the year. So that is what we'd say is like a green, so at age-related. And you have your strategies in place and one's a leadership one so that's toward getting people working at greater depth across the school and the other one is a reflective one so that's doing my Masters. So as long as I finish that one that one should be fine [laughs].

### **Some implications**

We have attempted to demonstrate in this paper how teachers responded to the sudden removal of levels from school assessment – replacing them, albeit with new language – and also how this has been brought about through the construction of new regimes of truth in, and between, schools. Through technologies of production, teachers recreate the tools – levels – necessary for them to conduct their work, affording them the opportunity to manage themselves in the ways demanded of contemporary teaching. However, simultaneously, these technologies subject them to regimes of control both locally and from afar and, as Perryman et al. (2017, 746) claim,

in all this, it is virtually impossible to separate out, as Foucault points out, capability from control. The development of new capacities, new skills of classroom management, of pedagogy, bring along with it the intensification of a power relation.

At this stage it seems reasonable to ask whether all this matters. If a new language of levels supports teaching and learning – as in many ways it seems to do for the teachers in this study – then is it not a good thing? And should not teachers be accountable for their work, managing themselves in terms of performance deemed appropriate? We

believe it does matter; and whilst our focus here has been on illuminating the processes of policy translation, we conclude with some remarks about the implications.

First, there is evidence from our work here of a changing pedagogical relationship between teachers and pupils which we think is potentially damaging. Despite the removal of levels being aimed at making assessment more formatively focused for all children, several teachers talked of the opposite happening, Jill, for example, stating that:

Jill: we have a real push on the interventions for the children who are developing-plus. The children who are almost secure but not quite. There is a real push to get them.

INT: Oh OK. So why is that?

Jill: because that's what we get into trouble with when our percentages aren't high enough as a school. ... It's probably a very small handful of children that are really, really significant [and] I think the new system does both disproportionately place a huge emphasis on those children. Yeah a certain group of children have become a lot more important.

And Jasmine:

All year I've been targeting the four children who are linked to my performance management, so the yellows who I want to get to age-related.

These are strategic practices, making pupils ever more intelligible by differentiating them into groups to manipulate the grid – literally, on a spreadsheet – of intelligibility. Such practices have been reported elsewhere as a means of producing 'progress' (Ingram et al. 2018) which in turn then produces the conditions for competition between both teachers (Pratt 2016a; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Pratt 2016b) and pupils (Keddie 2016). What is more, there is a growing literature pointing to the dangers of such grouping on outcomes as a whole across schools, especially in relation to the lowest



attaining pupils (Boaler 2005; Muijs and Dunne 2010; Boaler, Wiliam, and Brown 2000; Francis et al. 2017).

Second, we believe that teachers', and therefore pupils', relationships with the curriculum are changing too. In choosing mathematics as the main focus in this paper we have seen how the subject itself has become commodified and broken up by teachers into manageable chunks which can be taught, learnt and assessed to 'fit the grid' before then 'plugging the gap [if] they are not yet ready to start [the next] year' (Kristina). Again, we know that a disconnected curriculum taught through transmission is an ineffective way to learn mathematics (Askew 1997; Pampaka et al. 2011; Boaler 2015). A forthcoming paper explores this in more detail than we can here.

Third, we have been struck by Jasmine's enthusiasm for a system of surveillance that, to us, seems to smack of Orwell's Big Brother. Teacher retention in the UK at this moment has been described as 'in crisis' by both teaching unions and the Commons Public Accounts Committee (Ward 2018), the latter claiming that the Department for Education has failed to pay enough attention to retention of teachers, and the usual explanation in the media is of stress through overwork (ibid.). However, our sense is that the volume of work is only half the story and that of equal importance might be the extent to which teachers can 'feel confidence in [the system of assessment] and their willingness to take responsibility for it' as TGAT (Department of Education and Science 1988, 17) noted 25 years ago. We began this paper with a quote from Foucault which referred to assessment's 'normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish'. We also offered the opinion that the Commission on Assessment Without Levels is guilty of subtly shifting the blame, from policy makers to teachers themselves, for what it claims is the inappropriate use of assessment

and the 'distorting' of its primary purpose (informing teaching). Yet, the Commission claims that the 'main forms of assessment' include,

in-school formative assessment, which is used by teachers to evaluate pupils' knowledge and understanding on a day-to-day basis ...; in-school summative assessment, which enables schools to evaluate how much a pupil has learned at the end of a teaching period. (McIntosh 2015, 5)

Newton (2007), though, points out that the words 'summative' and 'formative' are not simply different adjectives for the same noun, but are words describing assessment in two categorically different ways according to their function: summative assessment being the *technical mechanism of judgement making* about an event, its grade or quality; and formative being the business of focusing on the *use to which this is put*. From this point of view both of the examples in the quote above might be seen as summative – since they represent the technical means of forming a judgement – but might also both be used formatively in future pedagogical activity. Hence, the Commission's claims that it is teachers who have distorted things is ironic since its own use of the idea illustrates the lack of clarity with which the concept of assessment is used in much of teaching policy and practice. Assessment may not work as it is meant to but this is managed, at policy and school level, by the day-to-day regime of truth around formative and summative assessment in schools.

It seems, to us, that teachers will always be held responsible for making education successful. Moreover, they must do so within, indeed as part of, a system of governmentality which creates regimes of truth that make it hard to renegotiate pedagogy. Our work therefore adds to the evidence, if more were needed, that whilst neoliberalism has undoubtedly altered some aspects of education for the better, it is also having a deleterious effect on teachers' and pupils' relationships with both the process

and subject matter of learning; nonetheless, it also offers hope that providing a different way to speak about assessment might open up alternatives that could be useful to teachers and have a more profound effect than simply removing the language of levels.

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